
Challenges in Organizing the U.S. Working Class in the Post-Soviet Period

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Organizing by communists in the United States requires the determination to fight an uphill battle against a ruling class that has been on the offensive against the workers and oppressed for more than three decades. It is in this spirit that Workers World Party has attempted to intervene, within our means and often beyond our means, in many struggles which we consider to be politically crucial for Marxists in the U.S.

We are participating in struggles against racism and national oppression – against police brutality, the death penalty, the prison-industrial complex, the right of Katrina survivors to return and have their communities rebuilt, among many other struggles. We are fighting for an anti-imperialist and internationalist line in the anti-war movement, while trying to forge a broad unity of forces. We are particularly interested in the growing opposition to the war within the military. We have been immersed in the battle for immigrant rights and the rights of undocumented workers from coast to coast, both as part of the class struggle and the struggle against national oppression. We have assisted in the fight for the freedom of political prisoners, including Mumia Abu-Jamal, Leonard Peltier and the Cuban 5, among others. We are battling the blockade of Cuba and defending Venezuela, as well as Iran and North Korea against U.S. imperialist aggression and defended Zimbabwe against Anglo-U.S. subversion. We have aided the organization of oppressed workers in their struggle to organize unions; helped in labor's resistance to forced concessions on healthcare and pensions; fought for the rights of women, lesbian, gay, bi and trans people. And in all these struggles we are fighting ideologically to uphold Marxism and the communist perspective.

I do not want to paint a false picture or exaggerate the influence of the party, which, like all progressive organizations in the U.S., is still struggling to gain influence and, in our case, is endeavoring to build a proletarian vanguard. Rather than site numerous examples of specific struggles. I would like to discuss the Marxist analytical foundation upon which the party bases its prognosis that the struggle for socialism will be revived in the U.S. These ideas are the core concepts that will be developed more fully in a book I am working on about The Struggle for Socialism in the Post-Soviet Era.

The international context of the contemporary struggle is still shaped by the collapse of the USSR and Eastern Europe. Prior to that earthquake China had already made a retreat from the socialist road and allowed the capitalist mode of production to grow and erode the institutions of socialism. In a great historic gamble, for the sake of industrial development, it has practiced the "open door" policy of allowing imperialist investment. As the socialist camp was retreating, India, the second most populous country in the world, shifted in 1991 from relatively controlled state capitalism to a policy of opening to the IMF and foreign finance capital, moving toward economic integration with world imperialism.

Furthermore, in the wake of the collapse of the USSR, the GDR, the Czech Republic, and other socialist countries which constituted the material fortress of the socialist camp, many oppressed countries around the world lost all possibility of balancing the influence of imperialism and became easy prey to neo-liberal penetration.

The consequence is that a population of perhaps three billion people rapidly became open to imperialist plunder and super-exploitation within less than two decades. Of these three billion people some bourgeois experts

estimate that perhaps a billion and a half new workers have entered the global work force as a reserve army subject to being exploited by finance-capital of the U.S., Europe, and Japan. ¹

The crisis of U.S. imperialism in Iraq has revealed the fundamental vulnerability of the Pentagon. It exposes the military weakening of U.S. imperialism's global position. In Afghanistan, Iran, North Korea, Palestine, Lebanon, Venezuela, Colombia, the Horn of Africa and elsewhere, Washington's general inability to use their military prowess to subdue the peoples of the world is having deep political effects. Our party is trying to utilize the growing opposition to the war in the U.S. to take the movement from the stage of protest to resistance.

Beneath this political-military weakening there is a fundamental economic process that is shift in the world capitalist economy. This shift is gradually shaping the forces for both working class crisis and working class revival. In this regard we must focus on the leap forward in the development of the productive forces and the new phase of imperialist economic expansion – which is benignly referred to as “globalization.”

The most important outgrowth of these developments from the point of view of the working class is the shift in the international economic division of labor that has emerged in the last several decades. As a result of the advances in computerization, communications and transportation, Internet technology, and software development the old, sharp division of labor between the oppressed countries and the oppressor countries is being steadily dissolved.

Manufacturing and services used to be centered in the imperialist countries and the workers and peasants in the oppressed countries were consigned to supplying the imperialist industrial machine with raw materials and agricultural products. They were primarily restricted to the back-breaking labor, in the mines, on the plantations and peasant plots producing for export or in the ports, building roads, railroads and maintaining the infrastructure.

But in 2004, 31 percent of world merchandise trade emanated from so-called developing countries. This is the bourgeois economists' terminology for countries whose economies and standard of living have been shaped by the legacy of colonialism and imperialist oppression – countries with low wages relative to the imperialist countries but with growing technical and technological capabilities. Whereas these countries used to be exporters of agricultural products or natural resources, 70 percent of their export trade in 2004 was in manufactured commodities. That figure has undoubtedly grown since then.

Furthermore, there is a growing current of offshoring services from the imperialist centers. A former president of the Federal Reserve Board, Alan Blinder, is the leading spokesman for a group of bourgeois economists who have been warning for the last few years that continuing this course could lead to a social explosion in the U.S. Blinder has warned that because of advances in the use of Internet technology the service industry is due to suffer an even greater blow than manufacturing. He projects that there are 30 to 40 million service jobs in the U.S. now subject to offshoring. ²

For the first time in the history of imperialism, workers in the rich, privileged countries, in one area after another, are being thrown into direct wage competition with workers in the low-wage areas by the economic architects of world finance capital.

The giant monopolies have seized upon the new technology to redivide the operation of production and services so they can be broken up into separate segments and different parts of the processes can be relocated around the globe, including outsourcing within the imperialist countries, to the lowest wage areas. ³

The bosses have created global tiers of suppliers. Each upper tier supplier has lower tier suppliers. Like vassals and sub vassals under the feudal lords, they gather around the great lords of capital and bid for contracts. They constitute part of a new world-wide network of tens of thousands of corporations, stimulated and promoted by the giant monopolies, who serve as suppliers, who take the risks of capital investment and who round up the local workers into what the ruling class calls “production networks” or “value chains” spread across the globe. ⁴

When Lenin wrote his profound analysis *Imperialism the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, he laid a great emphasis

on the export of capital by the monopolies as being central to the imperialist stage. He noted that the export of capital yielded huge super-profits which formed the material basis of the corruption of labor officialdom and a significant section of the higher-paid working class – i.e., the development of a social patriotic labor aristocracy which formed a social support for its own ruling class. This was his explanation of the collapse of the Second International at the outbreak of World War I.

This explanation still holds true. The super-exploitation of the underdeveloped world still forms the basis of relative privilege among the upper layers of the working class in the imperialist countries. And, to be sure, the people in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean and the Middle East still do the back-breaking work in the mines and on the plantations. And the export of capital today is even more an essential feature of imperialism than it was in Lenin's time.

But Lenin's analysis must be expanded in light of present developments. Alongside the tendency to create privilege, the export of capital is now also having the opposite effect.

The super-exploitation of the oppressed and the garnering of super-profits so clearly described by Lenin, was constrained by geography and geology. To engage in super-exploitation required establishing a labor process. But under the old methods of production, the location and degree of super-exploitation was largely determined by the location and richness of the mines, oil wells, arable land, available workers, and so forth.

The development of the productive forces has set the bosses free from these limitations on their spheres of super-exploitation. Today, low-wage workers can be subjugated by capital virtually anywhere in the world, regardless of geography or geology.

With the scientific technological revolution the most advanced labor processes, that is the super-exploitation of labor, can be established almost anywhere that the bosses can find workers – whether in Singapore, Lesotho, Costa Rica, Bangladesh, Taiwan, Romania, Spain or the southern United States. The production of commodities, from the simplest to the most complex, can be broken up into different stages, these stages parceled out by the monopolies to coordinated global production networks, and surplus value realized in markets thousands of miles from production at minimal transportation costs.

This is the basis of the world-wide wage competition. But Marx wrote in the *Communist Manifesto* that competition among the workers is what keeps them from overthrowing their class enemy. He also showed that it is the growth of the “reserve army of the unemployed” that increases the competition among workers and constantly hinders their struggle toward unity.

Furthermore, Marx explained the true nature of wages in his explanation of the “buying and selling of labor power.” Wages are the purchase price paid by the capitalist for the labor power of workers. And that price was equal to what it took to keep the workers and their families alive – i.e., to be able to go to work in conditions healthy enough to perform their labor for the capitalist and to be able to return to work repeatedly during the most productive years of their lives to serve as exploitable labor -- so long as the bosses needed them. But not only did they have to remain fit for work, they had to produce the next generation of workers for future exploitation. The price that the capitalist had to pay for the sum total of this was the value of labor power, called wages.

But Marx also explained that every country had its historically determined level of what was considered the necessary means of subsistence for the workers. It depended on the degree of comfort to which the working class and society in general were accustomed, based on the degree of economic development of the country and the class struggle within that country. In what we today would call a country with a legacy of oppression, the masses were forced to accept less and in a more privileged country the masses were accustomed to more,

particularly where the trade unions were strong. In each case, accordingly, the bosses would pay less or more based upon national conditions.

The revolution in technology and the globalization of capitalist production and services is eroding the national determination of wages. The wage level of the working class in the imperialist countries, under pressure of the global competition set up by the giant monopolies, is being increasingly determined internationally and under the downward pressure of the wage level in the low-wage countries. From the point of view of the bosses, a worker in Detroit with health care, a pension, vacation and a living wage is overpriced, given the world labor market. Stating it from a Marxist point of view, the boss views wages paid that worker to be above the socially necessary value of labor power. The value of labor power, as far as GM, IBM, or GE are concerned should be closer to the wages in China or Mexico or the Philippines than in Detroit, New York or Chicago. And this is the direction that the bosses will continue to push in until the workers stop them.

To the bosses the workers in the U.S. are getting wages above the international value, as computed by the corporate planners of global economic empires. In a word, Marx's labor law of value and its corollary, the law of maximization of profits, is the driving force of the new phase of globalization.

Marx long ago explained that it is the development of the productive forces that not only creates new classes and destroys outmoded ones, but that under capitalism, which is compelled to constantly revolutionize the means of production, the character and relationships of existing classes constantly undergo transformation. Indeed, the current revolution in the means of production has so thoroughly increased the socialization of world production that it is exerting more and more pressure on the reactionary framework of private property and laying the basis for momentous future capitalist crises.

In the previous era of imperialism the export of capital sustained class stability in the imperialist countries and kept the workers in the oppressed countries in a completely dependent condition. In the present phase, the export of capital is creating a vast increase in the super-exploited international working class in the oppressed countries. This rapidly growing proletariat is being organized by the penetration and growth of capitalist production. And the export of capital to low-wage, high-unemployment countries is also laying the basis for instability and social upheaval inside the imperialist countries, the U.S. especially. The relative stability that exists today in the U.S. among the workers is far different from the post World War II stability. The present stability is fragile.

National oppression is increasing. The Katrina crisis was the most dramatic possible demonstration of the racism of the capitalist class and the capitalist state. Scenes of separation and dislocation reminiscent of slavery showed night after night on TV screens in a ghastly exposure of the utter indifference of the capitalist state to the helpless victim of easily preventable suffering and death. African American workers are suffering disproportionately from the attack on unions, particularly in the organized industrial sector. They are suffering most from the predatory mortgage lending scandal. This cannot but breed a new generation of resistance.

Immigration is central to the bosses' newly energized drive to bring down wages in the U.S. Millions of documented and undocumented workers from Latin America, the Caribbean, the Philippines and all over the world, have been forced to labor without rights, without protection, for low wages just to keep their families alive. As the outpouring of millions of immigrants on May Day 2006 showed, there is a rebellion brewing down below.

At this very moment 2.2 million families are faced with the prospect of losing their homes. In the last two decades over 30 million workers have lost their jobs in the U.S. Of those who were able to find new jobs two-thirds of them worked for less money, with fewer if any benefits. Insecurity is growing. The younger generation of workers in the U.S. faces greater hardships than any previous generation since the Great Depression.

We are confident that these downward pressures will lead to a revival of the struggle among the workers and the

oppressed in the U.S. that will break through the surface of reactionary ideology and capitalist norms and lead to struggles not seen in the last 75 years. Intensified national oppression, including that of indigenous peoples, sexual and gender oppression, are all taking place in the framework of deepening class exploitation. This is bound to arouse resistance. As the saying goes, “the counterrevolution whips the revolution along.”

Our party certainly is not going to sit back and wait for the revolution to come. We are going to fight for international class solidarity and international organizing as the starting point in warding off this new international wage competition, not the bourgeois protectionism of the backward U.S. official labor leadership and right wing demagogues.

The advanced workers must be made conscious of the machinations of the bosses to engineer this wage competition. The answer is not to deny jobs to workers in India or Mexico. They need jobs, too. We must strive to explain to the U.S. workers what their bosses have done to Mexico, what the British imperialists did to the Indian workers and peasants. And the issue should be turned around. There must be jobs both in the U.S. and in Mexico – not either or. And they must be jobs at living wages. Workers in the U.S. must know that their fate is bound up with the fate of the workers in India and Mexico. White workers must know that their fate is bound up with that of Black, Latino and Asian workers, and that means immigrant workers, too.

This struggle will require the highest international solidarity, cross-border organizing and coordination to counter the global schemes of the bosses; and capital has given the workers the technological means to facilitate such organizing. It will require the most strenuous struggle against national oppression and for class unity to break up attempts to divide our class; and it needs the greatest efforts on behalf of solidarity with immigrant workers, whose plight is just another part of capitalist globalization and the fever for low wages that has gripped the bosses in the wake of the collapse of the USSR.

We must bring the message to the workers that their class right to a job and a future overrides the right of the bosses to shut down or move a plant or an office. Our class must learn to reject the logic of capitalism that says that the workers must pay so the bosses can stay “competitive”

We must fight for class unity by showing that defending immigrant workers is a defense of all workers; that fighting racism and national oppression by white workers is the only road to class unity and is the most fundamental necessity for victory in the class struggle – especially in the U.S. racist prison house of nations.

We must fight to make the trade union movement represent the class as a whole, whether it be on the issue of the right to health care, to housing, to education, child-care, etc. And we will fight for jobs and education for the disenfranchised working class youth.

A communist organization in the U.S., with its adventurist ruling class, must always bear in mind the relationship between imperialist war, capitalist economic crisis and revolutionary struggle, from the Paris Commune to the Bolshevik and Chinese revolutions. In the post-Soviet era, U.S. imperialism has declared as its mission the struggle to reconquer regions that were lost in the last seventy five years, stay. For this period, reconquest has replaced interimperialist rivalry as the driving force of war. This is behind the war in Iraq, the threats to Iran, North Korea, the military encirclement of Russia and the military build up in the Pacific aimed at China.

Our party’s approach to the growing anti-war movement in the US. is to assist the workers in merging their class struggle against the economic, social and political attacks on the domestic front with the struggle against imperialist war and intervention.

We are going to do everything in our power to hasten the revival of the class struggle and on the basis of these principles we want to unite with all anti-imperialist and communist forces in the post-Soviet phase of the

struggle for world socialism on the road to working class power.

¹ The capitalist counterrevolution in the USSR and Eastern Europe destroyed guaranteed employment for two hundred million people. It caused an explosion of unemployment and poverty. The ending of the “iron rice bowl” policy in China and the dissolution of the communes created mass dislocation and unemployment and a migration to the cities. India has mass unemployment as does Bangladesh, Indonesia, the Philippines, Mexico, South Africa and many other large population oppressed countries that are now the intensified target of the so-called “globalizing” imperialist transnational corporations and banks.

² The offshoring and outsourcing of manufacturing has progressed considerably in recent years, but what is emerging is the offshoring of services. GE, IBM, Boeing, accounting firms, major banks and investment houses, airlines, medical practices, etc. are offshoring everything from customer service call centers, to reading x-rays, to doing tax returns, computer programming, engineering, research and development, etc. These jobs are being sent to India, the Philippines, China, Russia, where wages and salaries are anywhere from a quarter to a tenth of the wages and salaries in the U.S. Millions of jobs are at risk as the bosses get more expert at moving these jobs around the globe and as the technology advances.

³ Let me give just one classic example – that of Dell Computer, the largest personal computer manufacturer in the world. It has six assembly plants throughout the world: in Brazil, China, Ireland, Nashville, Tenn., Austin, Texas, and Malaysia. The assembly plant in Penang, Malaysia, gets its components from the region. It gets Intel processors from factories either in the Philippines, Costa Rica, Malaysia, or China. The memory can come from Taiwan, south Korea, or Germany, among others. The graphics card can be made in Taiwan, mainland China or other locations. The mother board could have come from a Korean-owned factory in Shanghai. The hard disk is made in Indonesia, Malaysia or elsewhere. The modem, the battery, the LCD, the power cord, the memory stick, the carrying bag, etc., could have been made at any one of multiple suppliers throughout the region, including Thailand, Indonesia, or Singapore. Dell makes sure that it has a stable of suppliers on hand to compete with each other and to make sure that it has parts available at all times, even though it is the suppliers that must keep the inventory on hand in order to keep Dell’s business going.

⁴ These thousands of suppliers are the global foremen who take their cut of the surplus value supplied by the low-wage working class in what are really “networks of super-exploitation” and their factories are really the collective property of the giant monopolies, from Cisco, to Hewlett Packard, to GM, Ford, Nike, Liz Clairborne, Levis and so on. It is to such chains that Wal Mart directs its suppliers in order to get the lowest prices. Some of these suppliers are owned outright by the transnationals, but most are contract manufacturers, each specializing in aspects of capitalist production required by the giant monopolies.